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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000082

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR P, NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, AND SPECIAL ENVOY MITCHELL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/25/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: RE-ENGAGING WITH SYRIA: THE MIDDLE EAST'S  
UNAVOIDABLE PLAYER

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The SARG welcomed the appointment of Special Envoy Mitchell, indicating a willingness to engage with him, but that is only the first step. In dealing with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, form and substance will be important in near equal measure; previous attempts to elicit constructive behavior have fallen flat in part because U.S. "benchmarks" offended Syrian sensitivities. Bashar's worldview offers us little common ground but he wants and anticipates a better relationship with the new U.S. administration. As we pursue a Middle East peace agreement, we will find dealing with Syria is unavoidable. The USG has little recent experience dealing with the SARG, but some key elements ) setting the agenda and pace, dealing with Syria across the range of our interests, and exploiting our competitive public diplomacy advantage ) will be essential to a successful approach. End summary.

¶2. (C) Some Middle Eastern players are indispensable, others, like Syria, are unavoidable. As the USG pursues a Middle East peace agreement, a decision to re-engage with Syria would almost certainly prove to be frustrating, labor-intensive, and costly, at least in terms of quid pro quos. At the end of the day, we may hope that Syria would join efforts at regional peace, including by restarting talks with Israel, but more realistic goals would be merely to keep Syria from 1) obstructing progress between Israel and the Palestinians, 2) meddling in Lebanon, and 3) facilitating terrorism in Iraq. Given Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's worldview, the prospects for achieving a rapport with Syria, as opposed to rapprochement, are not good. In fact, dtente may prove to be a more apt description of an achievable bilateral relationship in the immediate post-Gaza period.

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"Peace without Syria Is Unthinkable"  
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¶3. (C) Speaking to EU Ambassadors in Damascus January 22, SARG Presidential Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban welcomed the appointment of Special Envoy George Mitchell, citing him as someone with whom the SARG would be happy to engage. The Syrians will have rightly read the appointment of Special Envoy Mitchell as evidence of the new administration's priorities but will feel slighted by the lack of a Damascus stop on his first trip to the region. Speaking to Der Spiegel on January 20, Asad said, "Peace without Syria is unthinkable." What he might have added, but didn't need to, is that Syria will ensure that any attempt at peace-making that doesn't include Syria will not only be unthinkable, it will also be impossible.

¶4. (C) Bashar al-Asad does not rule exclusively by diktat,

but in his minority-led regime the Syrian policy-making dynamic revolves heavily around getting the President's ear. Since the low point in 2005 when Bashar's grip on power ) post Lebanon-withdrawal ) was widely questioned, he has solidified his position, averted the emergence of rivals, and imposed his will across the apparatus of government. Bashar's success in ensuring his own survival has convinced him of the near-infallibility of his own judgment: while his entourage may attempt to shape his thinking, they do not overtly challenge it. Bashar is the key ) only his opinion counts when it comes to foreign policy decisions.

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Inside Bashar's Brain  
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15. (C) On foreign policy, Bashar easily defaults to the Ba'athist ideology and its heavy reliance on framing all issues through the prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict but he is capable of pragmatism. Whatever principles Bashar evokes in his rhetoric, his ultimate goal is to preserve his regime which, for him, requires preserving all existing options without forgoing new options. The only internal consistency in Syria's foreign policy is the SARG's desire to play all sides off each other; Bashar has added an additional requirement that Syrian foreign policy must also showcase his abilities as a leader. Bashar's thinking on specific issues appears to rest on the following principles:

--The U.S. is in its declining years as a superpower; Syria needs better relations with the U.S. but not at the expense of its strategic relationship with Iran or its renewed

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relationship with Russia.

--Syria is the injured party in the U.S./Syria bilateral relationship; Syria's efforts to meet USG requests on counter-terrorism in 2004 were neither acknowledged nor appreciated; subsequent rhetoric questioning Bashar's legitimacy and pondering regime change was outrageous; the alleged U.S. attack in October 2008 at Abu Kamal epitomized the U.S. disregard for Syria.

--The West in general is hypocritical; as FM Walid al-Muallim puts it, the three key concepts that rule the West, capitalism, democracy, and human rights have all been discredited: capitalism by the financial services crisis, democracy by the failure to accept the election that put Hamas in charge of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and human rights by the inaction of the international community during the Israeli military operations in Gaza. The West can no longer "lecture" Syria.

--Syria, along with Iran and Turkey, are the superpowers of the region; Syria, with good relations with Iran and Turkey, occupies a pivotal position; pan-Arabism endures as a living concept but only Syria, by virtue of its Ba'athist ideology, maintains it as a basis of its foreign policy.

--The SARG, through its commitment to steadfast resistance to Israel, has remained true to its principles and consequently has maintained the trust and support of its people, in notable contrast to Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, where the willingness of those regimes to accommodate Israel have cost those leaders legitimacy; the three, plus PA President Mahmoud Abbas, are beholden to the U.S. and subject to its orders; their "moderation" is, in fact, capitulation.

--Resistance to occupation is not terrorism; Israel has proved by its actions in Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008-09 that it will resort to military force, with disproportionate injury and destruction borne by the civilian populations. Israel can only be dissuaded from forcibly imposing its will by Arab armed resistance. The "path to peace," Bashar now says, "lies through armed resistance."

--Real peace in the region can be achieved only through a parallel process by which Israel returns the Golan to Syria and reaches an agreement with the Palestinians that is accepted by all Palestinians (i.e., Hamas). When those peace deals have been met, there will no longer be a need for Hamas and Hizbollah as resistance organizations; the return of the Golan is a sine qua non for any regional progress.

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Handling Bashar  
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¶16. (C) Loath as we may be to pander to Bashar, any engagement would require that we establish a mode of communication that neither causes Bashar to abruptly disengage nor allows him to misconstrue what a new U.S. administration owes Syria. Previous U.S. attempts to elicit constructive behavior from Syria fell flat in part over substance. But they also failed because of presentation: Syrians still recall the U.S. "lists" of demands, sometimes called "benchmarks" of good behavior, that they found offensive. The UK seems to have found a formula that works: the British talk about "choices" with the Syrians, outlining the probable consequences of various courses of action, emphasizing that the Syrians are, of course, free to do as they will.

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The French Learn the Hard Way  
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¶17. (C) Communicating with Bashar is challenging enough, reaching meaningful agreement is yet more difficult. What appears to have been agreed in one encounter may prove not to be agreed in the next. A common experience for all those who deal with the SARG, the French have run into this phenomenon in spectacularly public way: prior to French President Sarkozy's visit to Damascus in September 2008, the event that formally ended Syria's isolation, Bashar committed to the French to install an ambassador in Beirut and begin the border demarcation process by December 31. That deadline passed with an embassy established in Beirut, but no ambassador and no reinvigorated border demarcation process. The lesson learned from the French experience is not "Trust

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but verify;" it is "Trust but ensure that mutual commitment delivery is incremental and simultaneous."

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The Way Ahead  
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¶18. (C) Anticipating a new U.S. administration, Bashar has opined that an improvement in relations will be a slow process. Except for relations with Iran (he says good relations with the U.S. won't require a break with Tehran), his public musings have avoided the big issues and have tended to focus on personnel and U.S. embassy operations. Asad and the SARG have been offended by the absence of a U.S. ambassador, interpreting the lack of an ambassador as a blow to Syria's prestige. It would seem that Bashar envisions rapprochement occurring on a technical level, with the U.S. making the first move with a new ambassador, to which the SARG would respond by allowing the reopening the embassy operations closed following the Abu Kamal attack. The appointment of a U.S. Special Envoy disrupts Bashar's vision; he may have to immediately move to substance and decide soon whether he wants to be part of a U.S.-led effort to pursue Middle East peace, whether he wants to sit on the sidelines, or whether he wants to actively oppose it.

¶19. (C) The USG has little recent experience dealing with the SARG on issues of substance. From our vantage point, however, we see several elements key to a successful approach:

--Writing the script: In re-engaging with the SARG, the trick would be to not get caught up in Bashar's technical scenario but to choreograph a sequence of events that would require the SARG to make significant policy choices, of increasing importance, at each step of the way. We've made a good start with the announcement of a Special Envoy. The next step is how to make the first direct contact and to gauge Syrian readiness. A 7th floor phone call (e.g., from Senator Mitchell) to Muallim would probably be seen here as a positive gesture. Syria's response would allow us to probe the thinking here.

--Setting the pace of events: Concurrent U.S. diplomatic initiatives on regional issues are likely to strain the fragile SARG decision-making system: staffing is poor and the key decision-maker is not a disciplined student. Limiting their time and space for maneuver would play to the advantage of the U.S. A balance would have to be struck between keeping the SARG in the reactive mode and forcing it into a shell of obstructionism.

--Sustained engagement, not "whack-a-mole": Syria may not be pivotal but it is central, in geographic as well as psychological terms. Though U.S. interests in Syria itself are minimal, managing Syria will be essential as an adjunct to our peace-making efforts with the Israelis and Palestinians. To ensure we get the results we want on the Palestinian track, we need also to protect our equities against Syrian meddling in Lebanon and Iraq. Otherwise, Syria will resort to its traditional tactic of playing all sides off each other, to avoid making the hard choices that real regional peace would require.

-- Maintaining the Public Diplomacy initiative: The SARG is a relative newcomer to the international public relations scene, but it will attempt to spin any engagement with the U.S. for domestic and foreign consumption. We can use the fact of U.S.-Syrian engagement to reach domestic Syrian audiences that have been largely been captive to SARG-controlled news agencies. We can also use our competitive PD advantage to present our engagement with Syria to our own regional and international advantage.

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